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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000953

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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE SUPPORTIVE OF NEW U.S. BURMA POLICY, BUT
CAUTIONS AGAINST RAISING EXPECTATIONS TOO HIGH

REF: SECSTATE 100518

Classified By: CDA Daniel Shields for Reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Burma has made several nuanced, conciliatory gestures towards the West, and Singapore believes the timing is right to engage Burma and nudge it along the road towards democracy, according to the Singapore Foreign Ministry. Singapore supports the new U.S. "carrot and stick" policy on Burma, but cautions that we cannot expect positive change overnight. Singapore indicated a willingness to work with the United States on Burma, but insists that it must maintain its appearance of neutrality, lest it lose credibility with Burmese regime. China and India have influence on Burma and will play an important role in the effort persuade the regime to reform, MFA told Post. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Singapore's policy on Burma suggests that it is unrealistic to expect Singapore to take a public lead on pushing for the goals the U.S. is pursuing, as described reftel. However, Post believes Singapore would be willing to use its substantial influence quietly and privately, particularly to promote Burma's engagement with the international community. MFA cited in our meeting the call between Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Yeo and the subsequent coordinated message Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong delivered to Than Shwe in July, and suggested that Singapore would be willing, on a case-by-case basis, to consider similarly coordinating in the future. End Comment.

¶3. (C) EP Counselor delivered reftel demarche highlighting the conclusion of the U.S. Burma Policy Review to MFA Southeast Deputy Director Kamal Vaswani in a September 29 meeting.

¶4. (C) Vaswani replied that Singapore views positively the Administration's policy of measured engagement with Burma. Vaswani said Singapore was impressed with Secretary Clinton's positive intervention at the Friends of Burma meeting. Recounting his experiences as a Burma Desk Officer in 1997, Vaswani noted that the debate over whether to pursue a policy of sanctions or engagement has been going on for over a decade, and that as Secretary Clinton had stated, the assumption that it has to be an "either/or" proposition is a false one, he said.

¶5. (C) Vaswani said the time appears ripe to engage Burma, and that the regime has in Singapore's view, made a number of conciliatory gestures in recent months. The Burmese regime's

willingness to meet with Senator Webb, release American citizen John Yettaw and reduce Aung San Suu Kyi sentence should all be considered positive gestures towards the United States, Vaswani said. Vaswani noted with approval Burma PM Thein Sein's decision to attend the UNGA and Foreign Minister Nyan Win's visit to Washington, where he visited the Jefferson Memorial and other symbols of democracy.

16. (C) The West should not underestimate such gestures, as they reflect a very nuanced message from Burma that it has taken heed of the international community's concerns but is doing so within the constraints of its system, Vaswani said. The GOB cannot be seen domestically as simply bending to international pressure, Vaswani added.

17. (C) Vaswani said it is unrealistic to expect a free and fair election in 2010. Positive change simply will not happen that quickly, he said. Instead, we should initially focus on promoting the inclusion in government of elements besides the military. The focus should then become to "press at the margins," Vaswani said. Stating that the West should be willing to "grab the low-hanging fruit," Vaswani suggested that the first step would be to develop civil society.

18. (C) Vaswani discounted the notion that any pressure could be brought to bear on Burma either through or within ASEAN. "Bring it up in ASEAN, and people will start to squirm in their chairs, nothing will get done," Vaswani said. Instead, Vaswani suggested engaging bilaterally with the Burmese. Singapore is willing to work with the United States on Burma issues in certain circumstances, but Singapore must continue

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to be seen as a neutral party or it would lose credibility with the Burmese regime, Vaswani said. Vaswani suggested the United States persuade China and India to take a greater role in bringing around Burma, noting their strong influence in the country.

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